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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the Launching Conference of the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) are reviewed, and its recommendations are explored. The conference participants considered how theories, teaching, and administrative practices in distance education worldwide could be used to design a new distance education system for a democratic South Africa. It was necessary to recognize that present practices are not adequate alone, and that student success depends on the quality of educational experience that an institution provides. The conference has therefore provided a good forum for considering how access to education and equal educational opportunities can be established. A summary of what delegates want from SAIDE includes the following roles: (1) policy, advocacy, and lobbying; (2) networking, cooperation, and facilitating; (3) acting as a resource center; (4) acting as a research and evaluation body; (5) training and staff development; (6) initiation and enabling; and (7) immediate tasks of information dissemination and administrative efforts. (SLD)

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CLOSING ADDRESS

Prepared for the

SAIDE LAUNCHING CONFERENCE

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by

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Two of my personal heroes met only once in their long lives. In 1900 William Langhorne Clemens, in his maturity, chaired the lecture in New York of a penniless young journalist, ex-prisoner, with few prospects in life, called Winston Churchill. In kindness, but with the kind of conceit that Churchill no doubt admired, Clements presented him with a complete set of the collected works of Mark Twain. On the flyleaf he had inscribed the advice - "To do good is noble : to teach others to do good is nobler - and less effort".

What Churchill never realised was that Clements **meant** it and what Churchill **really** learned was that you can become rich and influential if you learn to write well!!

It was the moral caution I had in mind when we put this Conference together. However, I should say that nowhere in South Africa, amongst the people I've worked with is there **less** need of Mark Twain's moral advice.

We anticipated no easy ride for the concepts of Distance Education, either

- because it was viewed as something second class - a possible appendage to the **real** education system
- or because it was viewed as an instant solution that can be brought about by the wizardry of modern technology
- or because it is an inappropriate strategy in this complex mixture of urban/rural; first and third world; massive illiteracy; and fearsome, institutionalised teaching incompetence.

That is, we feared **simplicities in conclusion** for and against. Somehow, we had to ensure that they would not prove an impenetrable barrier to a detailed analysis of the possibilities. How wrong we were to worry.

To do this, it was thought necessary to put to work representatives of as wide a range of South African organisations as possible, and in an environment that would stimulate discussion of the widest possible range of educational strategies and tactics.

Four factors were thought to be facilitative:-

- an environment of foreign **institutions**, to stimulate comparative ideas
- an environment of foreign **practitioners**, to comment, criticise, compare, compliment and complement
- an **outsider's review** of one particular field and the duty to subject it to analysis based on South African experience

- finally, **time** in which to clarify issues, problems, possibilities and proposals

You will be relieved to hear that I am NOT going to attempt to review the findings and conclusions of the Conference. The clarity, detail, sensitivity and sheer common sense of your summaries would make that on act of supreme supererogation. They are so good that we can reasonably say **"wait till you read it in the book"**. I would go further - these are the best Working Group reports I have ever seen (perhaps because I wasn't in the groups) and I should like to offer my thanks, and SAIDE's relieved gratitude.

Instead: I will quickly review the objectives of the conference; venture a couple of comments on what seem to have transpired; and then quickly review your SAIDE recommendations. This will have to be a list for the record only since there are another half a dozen conferences in them.

The view of two admirable gadflies (perhaps the **only** role you did not quite specify for SAIDE) provided the motif for the Conference. James Thurber taught us that "it is better to know **some** of the questions than **all** of the answers". Oscar Wilde reminded us that "personal experience is the most vicious of limited circles", (and we need help in liberating ourselves from it). During the Conference, **very occasionally** I also thought of the only thing that Jimmy Hoffa deserves to be remembered for. "I may have faults," he said, "but being wrong is not one of them".

We wished to consider how the theories, teaching and administrative practices, and materials of Distance Education worldwide, could be of help in designing the new education system for a democratic South Africa. And we wished to help South Africans to establish collegial relationships with a wide range of practitioners from around the world to their MUTUAL benefit. We know it **will** be for mutual benefit. We have been doing it for many years now and we **know** it happens that way.

It was necessary, therefore, to bring together: the **complexities and range** of experience and achievements; the **lessons** of appropriately tailored solutions; and above all the **benefits** of open exchange of knowledge and experience between colleagues with similar aims, if different methods.

All this is a collection of unexceptionable tactics that might be applied in any country. One additional external view of South Africa I feel I can risk, because it is one that visitors quickly developed. Contrary to the belief of many South Africans, all its educational problems are not totally unique, there are many similarities with other cultures and their problems. One only has to look at the small, but real achievements in Sri Lanka. There, at times during the civil war, Distance Education was the only form of education that was immune from the carnage. Or if South Africa wants to feel really lucky it is only necessary to think of the problems faced by the Indian authorities which kept Ram Reddy from addressing us last Monday.

The task of the Working Group was simple to outline. Each was expected to review current provision, its objectives and its achievements and to consider how Distance Education can help. Here, occasionally I detected an unresolved issue. By Distance Education did we mean that collection of practices **currently in use**? Or did we mean that collection of practices which might soon, or in the future political dispensation, be brought into use? But this ambiguity is not necessarily a bad thing. We do not know precisely what collection of practices will be appropriate for a given educational problem in a specific social setting. At least there is conclusive evidence that the conference has developed awareness of the enormous range of options. I hope you will forgive me for adding "and also that present approaches will not do".

We have a saying in Distance Education that its role is to open doors to knowledge and learning, **but its nemesis comes when it acts as a revolving door.** That is, when too many of those who enter an institution discover, after some experience of failure, that they are back on the outside. No-one knows the magic figure, for a given setting, at which an open door revolves or vice versa. But, if I may be forgiven for offering my view of Distance Education in South Africa, it is fairly comprehensively, a revolver. So let us be quite clear (and there were rumblings of this within the Working Groups, though none got to the point of saying it). **Distance Education structures that principally generate failure cannot be used <u>seriously</u> to increase education opportunity** at least, in the massive ways that you clearly have in mind for South Africa. It is wholly illogical; the arithmetic won't work; it would be self defeating.

The precise position is difficult to define. Too often, one feels (with the exception of the superb work being done by the South African Institute of Race Relations and by one or two of the recently established organisations) that statistics are being used in South Africa not as a living record of social progress but (to use the deservedly immortal phase of Andrew Lang) "as a drunken man uses lamp-posts - for support rather than illumination".

Perhaps in the near future you should be thinking of a definition of education opportunity in which **a good chance** of success **is a necessary prerequisite**. This, of course, is easier said than done (I nearly said SAIDED) because it turns traditional educational thinking on its head. That is, it requires us to recognise that student success depends upon the quality of educational experience the institution provides. In quality Distance Education there is no refuge to be found in blaming the student.

Perhaps a first step towards that might be to require all institutions to publish details of their student-course success rates and their qualification throughput rates. Inevitably that raises another danger. It puts exit performance standards at risk. But that way lies hell and damnation; it is the **other** responsibility of the educator.

My second main theme is the consequence of the first. What the Conference was really about was opening education. Time and time again people explained how the rigidities of attitudes and assumptions of educators and planners, and of the practices of schooling, limit

what might be done. Instead they act more to inhibit education, generating failure and feelings of inadequacy.

By definition, all human organisations have regularities of behaviour, rules of conduct and definitions of standards. But, the aim of openness in education is to identify those taken-for-granted attitudes; assumptions about people and social processes; and ritualized practices, which hinder the achievement of educational and social goals. Having identified them, ways have to be devised to modify them. Surely, that is what South African educators have been doing in the whole National Education Policy Investigation. There are also elements of it in the government's Education Renewal Strategy. Certainly, to an intermittent visitor, all the Working Groups seemed to be looking at ways in which the existing system can be liberated from its expensive and uneducational rigidities. All seemed to be assuming that the primary objective of an education system in a democratic society should be to ensure that opportunities for educational development must be available for all people, at all times, and on their own terms. I hope you feel that the Conference has been a good forum for consideration of how this can be brought about.

And now I can present to you our first summary of what you would like to see SAIDE doing. It is an impressively comprehensive list and I offer it to you at this stage with little expectation that you will find something seriously missing.

1. POLICY/ADVOCACY/LOBBYING ROLE

- status/work of Distance Education
- resources for Distance Education
- addressing certification/accreditation/recognition issues, both **within** current legislation and for **future national frameworks** for adult education.
- addressing issues of **access** (eg to higher education): criteria for admission requirements
- advocacy for marginalised sectors eg adult basic education
- advocacy for role of **public** broadcasting facilities for Distance Education

2. NETWORK/COOPERATION/FACILITATION

- bringing together different **interests** in Distance Education

- bringing together different **agencies** for Distance Education to begin to look at national strategies: local/regional/national cooperation ie encouraging cooperation between existing providers

- facilitate **sharing** of resources between agencies egs

    - materials
    - facilities - community learning centres

- course production methods (and mechanisms?)
- dispatch capacities
- delivery systems
- information

☛ facilitating **meetings** of interest groups **within** sectors - eg higher education re institutional transfer of credits

☛ cooperation and networking with **international** players in order to enhance perspectives on Distance Education, and learn from activities in other countries

☛ clients/learners

3. ACT AS A RESOURCE CENTRE

☛ information/data base on
- materials/programmes/courseware
- agencies and institutions
- expertise
- **cost** and availability

ie current, reliable information on resources for distance education

Ultimately a resource centre itself for programmes?

4. ACT AS A RESEARCH AND EVALUATION BODY

☛ mapping Distance Education research that already exists
☛ cost effectiveness of Distance Education
☛ **commission** research on gaps in Distance Education knowledge?
☛ gather research data on international experience in Distance Education
☛ help establish **conceptual clarity** in some sectors for Distance Education (eg ABE)
☛ monitor/participate in policy debate on adult education and the role of Distance Education ie put Distance Education on the agenda
☛ scenario writing - exploring best and worst case scenarios
☛ language issues in Distance Education

5. TRAINING AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

☛ could SAIDE offer/organise **training** in:

- courseware production
- curriculum design for Distance Education

- training of intermediaries/educators

☞ could SAIDE offer **evaluation** of:

- Distance Education institutions
- Distance Education programmes

6. INITIATION AND ENABLING

Begin to establish **values/principles** to inform the organisation eg :

1. Work towards the achievement of a system of **open learning** which will meet the diverse needs of the people who have been excluded from formal provision.

2. SAIDE should try to embed Distance Education issues within the context of the overall reconstruction of education.

7. IMMEDIATE TASKS

- papers to attendees
- register conference participants
- follow up meetings **within** sectors to begin examining specific issues
- set up **representative** trustee body/executive or secretariat
- information network
- build on **existing institutions** and client bases of areas of vocational education
- structure for SAIDE
- association of Distance Education institutions?
- be aware of constraints
- PRIORITIZE

Now I feel a bit like the man who came out of a long film. When asked what it was like he said "it has a surprise ending - just when you think it will never end - it does."

Well just as you began to think my address would never end - it has.